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STATE SENATOR • 17TH SENATE DISTRICT

Capitol Update

By Senator Howard Marklein

August 5, 2016

Summer School for Legislators: Legislative Council Study Committees

This week I had the honor of Co-Chairing the first meeting of the Joint Legislative Council Study Committee on Rural Broadband. The study committee, which includes several residents of the 17th Senate District, is tasked with reviewing the Wisconsin Broadband Expansion Grant Program and the extent to which it has encouraged construction of broadband infrastructure in areas of the state with few broadband service providers.

We are further asked to consider the following concepts:

- Discuss the criteria used to evaluate applications and award grants.
- Consider alternatives for determining eligibility and prioritizing proposed projects.
- Consider alternative methods for encouraging construction of broadband infrastructure.
- Identify options to recommend.

We met for the first time on Wednesday, August 3, 2016 for a full day of “summer school” to begin our study of this topic. We heard from several expert speakers on our topic, received a lot of good data and started the process of determining our best course of action. I am pleased to report that we have gathered an informed, engaged and invested committee to address the challenges of rural broadband in Wisconsin.

The key issues identified by the committee on Wednesday focus primarily on the availability, affordability and speed of broadband technology throughout our state. We are also focusing on clarifying the government’s role in broadband investment – both at the state and federal level.

Next month, I am looking forward to digging deep into the current grant process, talking to some specific stakeholders and possibly reviewing how other states are supporting rural broadband expansion. Our ultimate goal is to gather enough information so that we may focus on answering our charge and developing solutions in short order.

Many study committees emerge with a slate of recommendations for potential legislation for the next session to address the issues. In 2014 there were 19 study committees that produced 10 bills that were enacted into law during the 2015-16 Legislative Session. Study committees also generate a wealth of knowledge, reference material and information that can be shared with other members of the legislature moving forward.

This session, legislators suggested 60 topics for study this summer and fall. The bi-partisan Council chose seven, including my recommendation for a study of the Rural Broadband Expansion Grant process. As your State Senator, I nominated this topic for study because I have concerns about the lack of applications for grant funding from the 17th District where we have a drought of broadband capability in many of our

communities. I want to know if the program is working, addressing real issues and whether it is the right way to meet the needs of our state into the future.

I think that the people we have gathered to ask and answer these questions will be able to give the legislature very good direction for the future. Our committee includes economic development professionals, municipal and county leaders, rural residents, telecommunications companies and legislators from rural districts with vested interest in the grant program.

We have also had many individuals, organizations and associations offer their expertise and input as resources for our discussions. I am encouraged by the significant amount of interest and engagement in our study committee.

But, as I mentioned, we are not the only committee in summer school this session. The other active Study Committees include:

- Legislative Council Study Committee on Access to Civil Legal Services
- Legislative Council Study Committee on the Preservation of Burial Sites
- Legislative Council Study Committee on Publication of Government Documents and Legal Notices
- Legislative Council Study Committee on Reducing Recidivism and Removing Impediments to Ex-Offender Employment
- Legislative Council Study Committee on School Data
- Legislative Council Study Committee on Volunteer Firefighter and Emergency Medical Technician Shortages
- Special Committee on State-Tribal Relations

As you can see, many of the topics addressed in study committees are directly related to topics that came up in the legislature, within agencies or in the news over the last two years. The Study Committee process is a great way to discuss tough issues with a collective goal of finding solutions.

I look forward to providing updates as the Study Committee on Rural Broadband meets throughout the fall months. All of our meetings are open to the public and available on WisconsinEye. For more information, please visit the Joint Legislative Council website for our committee:
<http://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/study/2016/1496>

For more information and to connect with me, visit my website
<http://legis.wisconsin.gov/senate/17/marklein> and subscribe to my weekly E-Update by sending an email to Sen.Marklein@legis.wisconsin.gov. Do not hesitate to call 800-978-8008 if you have input, ideas or need assistance with any state-related matters.

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